Three Pound Brain

No bells, just whistling in the dark…

The Post-Posterity Writer (or, How to Write Literature at the End of the World)

Let's look at the facts on the ground.

Every major ecosystem on the planet is in a state of decline. Technologically mediated social change threatens to outrun our capacity for cultural adaptation. And the means to eradicate each other on a mass scale are becoming both more numerous and more accessible.

We humans, meanwhile, suffer a large variety of cognitive shortcomings: a tendency to dislike criticism, to gravitate toward flattery, to oversimplify, to naturalize our values, to cherry-pick confirming evidence and selectively ignore everything else, to become overwrought when contradicted, often to the point of intimidation and outright violence.

Given these facts–and they are facts–what should a socially conscientious writer do?

If writing what the literary establishment calls 'literature' strikes you as a sensible, perhaps even obvious, answer, then I have an argument for you to consider.

You see, I think the literary establishment has made a virtue out what is in reality a grave cultural affliction. And I fear that what presently passes for literature, far from mitigating our civilization's travails, is making things worse.

I take it as a given that cartoon reifications are the best that we humans can do when discussing social phenomena: things are *always* more complicated than our conceptual regimentations make them seem. But this does not change the fact that these regimentations are often all we have to work with, nor does it mean that they don't warrant conditional commitment. Without them, cultural criticism, let alone sociology or any of the other 'human sciences' would be impossible.

So when I mention things like the 'literary establishment' or 'popular mainstream,' I fully understand that the complexity of the phenomena far outruns the simplicity of the terms. But if you genuinely believe that our culture possesses short circuits that require addressing, then no matter what your level of analysis, you have no choice but to pose your simplifications as carefully as you can, and hope that something of the offending dynamic shines through.

There are at least three short circuits I would like to address, all of them due to beliefs and attitudes common to members of the literary establishment and to the way those beliefs and attitudes impact culture and society as a whole. The first short circuit involves the problem of cultural compartmentalization, the way in which writers and their readers tend to sort themselves into relatively exclusive groups. The second involves the problem of interpretative illiteracy, the fact that so many people actually believe in the possibility of definitive interpretations of texts. The last one involves what I call the "for all time fallacy," which turns on the assumption that our culture's literary future will resemble its literary past.

The kind of cultural compartmentalization I'm speaking of is perhaps best illustrated in the spate of accusation and acrimony surrounding Stephen King's 2003 National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. According to Harold Bloom, this award represented

"another low in the shocking process of dumbing down our cultural life." Steve Wasserman, the long time book editor of the *LA Times* before its fall to the philistines is reported to have said, "I look forward to the day when Danielle Steele, that Balzac of our time, is equally recognized." The list of precious comments goes on, I assure you.

Not to be outdone, King strikes back in the only forum where he can reasonably assume to bend the ears of his detractors: his acceptance speech. "What do you think?" he asks. "You get social or academic brownie points for deliberately staying out of touch with your culture?" Some among the literati rally to his defense: as Cecilia Tichi of Vanderbilt University tells the *Christian Science Monitor*, for literary writers "to say that somehow his readers aren't the best readers or the real readers … is just lunacy." But most of their support, if you read closely, is more than a little backhanded. As NPR's Alan Cheuse puts it, King has his uses, but only "as a kind of Judas goat to lead people into the reading of something more serious." King's real locus of support has to be the internet, where interest in genre fiction has spawned a galaxy of different communities (and may very well be revolutionizing literary culture). On messageboard after messageboard you find one-sided discussions extolling King and condemning his critics. If I were Harold Bloom, I would avoid vanity googles for some time to come.

This is a familiar pattern, one that you see repeated across almost every sphere of human cultural production. On the one hand you have the specialists, those whose tastes are the result of training over and above their socialization within a given culture. On the other hand you have the non-specialists, those whose tastes are the result of bare bones socialization within a given culture. Since no one is born trained, every specialist has the apparent advantage of having been a non-specialist at one time in their life. This contributes to the conviction that they can see *beyond* the tastes of the masses, and thus to the temptation to claim certain kinds of authority. From their perspective, the general yardstick tends to appear simplistic, if not out and out juvenile. "If only," they cry, "the fools would open their eyes!" But because there's no authority without the *recognition* of authority, they tend to come across as almost comically pompous.

Since ignorance is invisible, most non-specialists are convinced that their tastes are the only yardstick that matters, and that the tastes of the specialists are either kinds of hothouse aberrations or an arbitrary means of securing prestige. "Oh come on," they cry, "get over yourselves!" Because the possibility that the books they read contain unseen levels of blemish and beauty is a very real one, they tend to come across as defensive. Because the specialists have occupied the cultural high ground for so long, they tend to be embittered as well.

Each side condemns the other, neither side listens, and both retire from the debate confirmed in their low opinion of the other. It's almost as if, thanks to a heady cocktail of bias and ignorance, the game is rigged to confirm stereotypes. The one tribe bemoans the cretinization of popular culture, while other tribe, the *mass* tribe, makes a virtue out of anti-intellectualism.

And the pattern repeats itself over and over and over.

Now obviously I'm a partisan of the King camp. And yet, my favourite author (at the moment) is Don DeLillo: the opening of *Underworld* literally makes me tremble with jealousy. I also happen to think that *Blood Meridian* is one of the greatest works of fiction ever written, and that Cormac McCarthy has only produced pale shadows ever since. In other words, my tastes are probably much more aligned with Harold Bloom's than otherwise, which shouldn't be surprising, given the amount of specialized training I've suffered.

And yet I primarily write epic fantasy.

I've made a game out of watching people's faces when I tell them this at the 'literary events' I attend. There's nothing quite so exquisite as the flutter of embarrassment between strangers: the blank look, the forced word of affirmation, the rush for the *excuse-me-I-must-go* exit. Perhaps you pride yourself on your post-modern scruples. Perhaps you're telling yourself, even now, that you are every bit as open-minded as you pretend to be, that you have nothing whatsoever against 'epic fantasy,' even though…

It's not to your taste? And why might *that* be?

Because it's all commercial crap?

Don't feel guilty. After all, we're hardwired to stereotype: we have a three pound brain in a universe so big that photons older than the dinosaurs hit your eyes when you look up at night. Of course it's going to take short cuts. Of course it's going to avoid the hard work of honest consideration every opportunity it gets. It has more important things to look after, like getting fed and getting laid. Nobody wants to be a bigot, but the ugly fact is that *everyone is* in some way shape or form. Everyone.

And our bigotries have profound social consequences, even if sometimes they're too devious to be easily seen.

If my aesthetic inclinations tend toward Harold Bloom, you might ask–as some have–why I would bother rubbing ink shoulders with Stephen King. Why would I, as an English professor friend of mine once asked, "waste my time writing that fantasy crap?"

Because I am a *socially conscientious writer*. Because I want to argue with my readers, not entertain them with aesthetic and intellectual buzzes. Because, as much as I crave the respect of my literary peers, I have no interest in pandering to their values. Because I believe in the social value of literature. Because I believe writers have responsibilities.

Because I'm convinced that genre is the only place where literature reliably happens.

This has been my question for a long, long time. If you want to use narrative to argue, which is to say, to challenge received wisdom, then why the hell would you write for people who already share the bulk of your attitudes? If you write literary fiction, I guarantee you that aside from getting lucky now and again in the classroom, all you're going to do is provide a species of high-end entertainment. If you want to do more than simply entertain, then you have to *reach out* with your fiction, communicate to readers whose values and beliefs are substantially different from your own. And I would argue that pound for pound there's no better vehicle for doing this than writing genre fiction.

Now all this strikes me as obvious. The real mystery, it seems to me, is why the most gifted writers of our age, the narrative arguers extraordinaire, the DeLillos and so on, seem bent on communicating only to those who already share the bulk of their beliefs and values. When you really think about it, this is a kind of cultural tragedy, and a profound one, given that humanity stands upon so many brinks. We need critical insight now more than at any time in human history, and yet somehow we've managed to seal all our most penetrating voices in a kind of literary echo chamber. The walls are porous to be sure, but they remain walls nonetheless, and at a time when we can least afford them.

How the hell could something like this have happened?

In any communication breakdown (even a mass societal one with apocalyptic consequences such as this) either there's a problem with the transmitter, the signal, or the receiver. Since most everyone likes to make themselves the hero of their stories, it's no surprise that those on the transmission side have some exculpatory tale to tell. The one I hear the most often is some butchered variant of Adorno and Horkheimer's argument in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," something about the way standardization in mass market cultural production literally trains consumers to demand more standardization. In this scenario, the problem isn't that DeLillo doesn't reach out with his fiction, but that the System slams the door on his literary fingers. No matter how hard he heroically struggles, the corporate anaesthetization of the masses is simply too complete. He reaches and reaches, but the low-brow mainstream lacks the nerves to feel his touch, let alone the vocabulary to comprehend his voice.

I call this the "Myth of the Lowest Corporate Denominator." The fact is DeLillo does quite well entertaining the educated classes, *thanks* to the culture industry, and *because* of the ironic complexity and lyrical density of works like his bestselling *Underworld*. The problem isn't that the System is dumbing our society down. This is flattering to believe because it means anytime you write

something complicated you can pretend you're "fighting the System." But humans have always been stupid, no matter how many degrees they pile behind their names. The problem, the real problem, is that the System has found a way to prevent our society's most critical voices from tempering that stupidity *with doubt*. The problem isn't cultural decline, it's *cultural compartmentalization*. And Harold Bloom bears a far, far greater share of the responsibility than Stephen King.

The self-congratulatory institutional myth is that the literary establishment is, as the mission statement for the Kenyon Review puts it, "keeping the flame of literature alive." I actually think this metaphor is entirely accurate, insofar as it suggests that literature stands on the verge of flickering out, and so long as you understand "keeping" in the sense of holding cells and prison guards. Where did we go wrong? How could we be so oblivious as to conflate *ex*communication with the most profound communication of all?

Here's one possible story: the late 19th century boom in literacy generated a subtle but continuous social pressure on literary specialists to differentiate themselves from the masses, to avoid identification with what marketers call 'dissociative reference groups.' Since education was free, literary specialists could no longer rely on the price of their drinks to safeguard the aristocratic reputation of their establishment. They needed some new selection mechanism. Experimentalism was one such mechanism: since humans are conventional creatures, counting the violation of conventional artistic forms a positive provided an easy way to identify themselves over and against the masses.

The same is the case with the sacralization of the quotidian and the corresponding debasement of the spectacular. Fascination with spectacle is another human default: for whatever reason the bulk of humanity loves hyperbolic representations of action and reality. Transformed into a negative value, it became a convenient way of differentiating certain literary practitioners from the unwashed masses. Once this selection mechanism became institutionalized at the university level, the process became self-perpetuating. Every writer with a yen to argue learned very quickly–as quickly as I learned not to mention my epic scribblings in my undergrad literature classes–that the only *serious* narrative arguments were quotidian narrative arguments.

Shrinkage became the rule among the literary elite. And our all too human penchant for rationalization and stereotyping took care of the rest. Since the lack of communication across cultural blocs was too obvious to be ignored, they cooked up status quo preserving claims that either blamed the blocs not communicated to, or even better transformed both sides of the short-circuit–the one enlightened, the other cretinized–into hapless victims of an invincible System. And since the world is complicated and our brains love to economize, their disdain of conventionality and spectacle devolved into a kind of automatic reflex, a rule too obvious to warrant critical attention.

Which is why a part of you winced when I mentioned that I wrote epic fantasy. What could be more conventional? More spectacular?

All of this, I think, is wonderfully distilled in DeLillo's famous maxim: "Write for the page." I imagine many of you think this expresses a positive value, which might be paraphrased as something like, "The best writing is writing unconstrained by reader expectations." Sounds cool, I guess. After all, who wants to be *constrained*? And if your writing is unconstrained by reader's expectations, won't the chances of confounding those expectations be all the greater?

But this simply espouses a myth of compositional purity on a par with myths of motivational purity expressed in such hackneyed imperatives as "Follow your heart," or "Listen to your gut." Since your "heart" and "gut" are largely the product of childhood socialization, following or listening to them is bound to produce conventional results. "Follow your heart," understood in this light, is the way we say, "Do what society expects of you without question," under the flattering guise of motivational autonomy.

If "Write for the page," were simply a version of "Follow your heart," which is to say, a way for literary writers to embrace conventionality under the self-conscious pretense of aesthetic autonomy, then you would expect that DeLillo, despite his declarations to the contrary, would reliably confirm the expectations of his readership–which, he in fact does. Thanks to our compartmentalized culture, one of the most brilliant voices of our age has been reduced to writing narrative apologies–

entertaining–while *pretending* he writes narrative arguments.

Trust me. It's not a coincidence that only JK Rowling inspires mass book burnings anymore.

For whatever reason, the further we chase meaning from practical contexts the more volatile it becomes. This is why philosophers can mince and mince, why everyone has "their side of the story," why every article published in this magazine is subject to "death by a thousand qualifications," and so on. Humans are out and out horrible when it comes to the formation and preservation of interpretative beliefs. As decades of psychological research have shown, we congenitally skew and confabulate to convince ourselves and others of our moral and cognitive rectitude. We are compulsive, self-serving, theoretical bunglers.

Interpretative illiteracy, as I understand it, is simply the assumption that one's own interpretations are incontrovertibly true, which is to say, that one is somehow immune to the catalogue of cognitive and institutional shortcomings suffered by everyone else of the planet. Interpretative illiteracy, in other words, is a kind of magical thinking, one that victimizes humans in the *billions*. You literally can't turn on the evening news without encountering its disastrous consequences. Everywhere you turn you find humans confusing their typically self-serving interpretations for *the* interpretation.

Given that interpretation is the business of the literary establishment, you might expect the issue of universal interpretative literacy would rank high among its members' concerns. But this is not the case. There's plenty of hand-wringing and head-shaking, to be sure, but no one ever asks whether the literary establishment bears *any responsibility* for the sorry state of interpretative understanding in society as a whole.

My suggestion is a simple one. The porous mess of individuals who comprise the literary establishment need to see the superficiality of general culture, not as a flattering affliction, but as a *massive failure of their part*—the way, for instance, the scientific establishment characterizes declining scientific literacy rates. Everyone, from writers to reviewers to professors needs to ask themselves

what their role in contemporary culture is. Do you privilege certain insular subject matters at the expense of others? Do you communicate to people far different than yourself? Do you encourage writing that reaches out across cultural divides?

Or do you encourage communicating to the likeminded?

If so, you are directing critical resources away from society at large, and so reinforcing the illusion that meanings are easy, that things can be taken at face value, that the world is actually simple, and that "we," whoever that "we" might be, are almost certainly always the good guys. If so, you are reinforcing the magical belief in univocal interpretation, the magical belief that underwrites so much suffering in the world, everything from oppression to exploitation to invasion, and so increasing the possibility that we will annihilate ourselves in the uncertain years to come.

By this point I hope that you are at least willing to agree that writing for the likeminded is not a comfortable alternative. This admission alone, I think, should be enough to warrant a wholesale reevaluation of genre fiction. But there is one remaining literary conceit, an escape hatch you might say, that needs to be problematized, if not dispatched altogether. It's the notion that the literary writer writes for *more* than the present, that he or she must emulate Shakespeare and be, as Ben Jonson claims in the First Folio, "not of an age, but for all time!" The argument that posterity will rescue them from their in-group insularity.

When in the company of literary types, I often find myself more than a little amazed by their lack of curiosity regarding the future. When I ask them, for instance, whether they think there will be such a thing as books in fifty years, let alone a hundred years time, I'm often met with shrugs or blank looks. When I ask them whether they think anything written in the history of human race will be more than kindergarten curiosities by the end of the century they tend to look at me with outright incredulity.

But these questions are old hat in genre circles. Cochlear implants. Deep-brain pacemakers. The difference between these technologies and those that will replace them in a hundred years will be as great as the difference between the phonograph and the Blue-Ray–perhaps greater. Artificial

intelligence. Neurocosmetic surgery. Networked consciousnesses. We are literally the first generation in the history of the human race that cannot reliably predict that even its most fundamental institutions will exist in recognizable form in fifty years time, let alone one hundred.

Science fiction writers and afficionados often refer to this as the 'Singularity,' the point where the accelerating pace of innovation outruns our ability to predict what will still be what in the near future–the point at which, like the gravitational singularity it analogizes, conceptualization fails us altogether. Whatever you think of the analogy, the fact remains that we stand at the cusp of something more than simply remarkable. The sciences are presently reverse-engineering the world at a scale that is scarcely imaginable.

We are about to enter the *material post-modern*, an age where the rules that govern our physical existence are becoming ever more plastic to human desire–a second Enlightenment, one with far more dazzling and disturbing consequences. Imagine a society where aging is no longer compulsory,

where personalities can be amended and accessorized, where genomes express whatever consumer good we want them to express.

There is no such thing as posterity, not anymore. And this means that every writer living, whether they want to be or not, is a *post-posterity* writer. Either humanity destroys itself, or it innovates its way into something it cannot imagine. In a sense, we are encircled by armageddons.

The absence of a recognizable future changes everything. Without long term agendas, the point of all our practices is bent back to the present. To home. To what you are doing right now.

So what should a socially conscientious writer strive to do? Reach out, not inward. Try to actually provoke, rather than simply repeat the forms of past provocations. Get into genre, into film, into video-gaming, into whatever mode or media that allows you to communicate with differing people with dissenting attitudes. Instrumentalize conventions. Entertain better than the apologists. Argue them into the ground. Garner more and more attention. Do everything they can to infiltrate and recapture mass commercial culture. Say, "Hell, yes!" to Oprah.

And do it before it's too late.

The literary establishment has to be called to account. Its members need to be reminded that arguing is as arguing *does*, that because their aesthetic values tend to select audiences who already agree with them, their narrative arguments tend to do most of the things that entertainment does, and few of the things that arguments do. They need to understand that their exile from the cultural commons is self-imposed. They need to be convinced that this is cause for deep concern, that when people find themselves in a world where everything seems literal, a world where all the meanings seem mastered, they are prone to think their interpretation is not simply the best among convincing alternatives, but the only game in town.

We have so many critical voices, and so little sound and fury.

3 Comments to "The Post-Posterity Writer (or, How to Write Literature at the End of the World)"

Noah Cruickshank says:
June 13, 2011 at 5:23 pm
Dear Mr. Bakker,

I was unaware of your writing until a friend posted this essay on facebook. I must say that I am both terrified and awestruck by it. As a struggling writer (sometimes of genre fiction), I've found much of what you have to say true from personal experience. I think that part of the problem as well (which I'm sure you know but did not highlight) is the publishing industry's conception of "literary fiction," whatever that actually is in the end. As I've tried to get my book published over the last year, I have found that what's important to agents and most publishers is how easily my work can be consumed and marketed (I can't entirely blame them, publishing is a business) and less on what affect my work might have, which is deeply frustrating (as I'm sure you know personally, as well).
You seemed to suggest that it may be the internet where we can find a kind of robust communication between writers and readers again, and I'm inclined to agree, even with the many drawbacks that the medium has. Perhaps this is where we need to be. I'm not sure.

Thank you for writing this piece.

Noah Cruickshank

ps. I was born in Toronto, although I live in the States now. It's wonderful to see such eloquence from a fellow Canadian.

REPLY
adam says:
August 18, 2011 at 8:12 pm
Interesting thought experiment, would the literary establishment take you more or less seriously if you used a female pen name? Would the fantasy establishment take you more or less seriously if you used a female pen name? What would the reaction of both establishments be when they found out you were pretending to be a female writer? What sort of deviance and other negative attributions would they pin on you as a punishment for deceiving them?

REPLY
dmf says:
August 22, 2016 at 2:35 pm
no reblog button?

REPLY

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